

SPECIAL TROUT MANAGEMENT

Editor's note: This is the second installment of what we hope to include as a regular feature in North Dakota OUTDOORS - a column that offers insight into current issues or events that affect the state's natural resources or associated recreation. The Game and Fish Department deals with such issues on a regular basis, and receives sincere, passionate input "From Both Sides." OUTDOORS presents those points of view and opinions as a way to give readers a broad perspective.

Can, or should, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department dedicate up to 10 lakes in the state for trophy trout management?

That question was the basis for a series of public meetings in mid-June. The forums, held in towns near lakes that were selected for possible fisheries management changes, gave local anglers a chance for input, and also allowed Game and Fish biologists a chance to explain factors involved in developing more trout-specific waters.

The 10 lakes included were: Lightning Lake, McLean County; Nygren Dam, Morton County; McDowell Dam, Burleigh County; Baukol-Noonan Dam, Divide County; Kettle Lake and McGregor Dam, Williams County; Moon Lake, Barnes County; Blumhardt Lake, McIntosh County; Gravel Lake, Rolette County; and North Lemmon Lake, Adams County.

Trout management in North Dakota has evolved in the last 50 years, based largely on changing lake environments and public attitude.

In the 1950s and '60s, impoundments were being built in North Dakota at a rapid pace, providing new and productive waters in which stocked trout grew fast and large, providing good fisheries for a period of time. During that same time, anglers rated trout in the top five as a preference to catch.

Trout do not naturally reproduce in North Dakota waters so the only way to create or sustain a trout population is through stocking. Game and Fish began such a program in 1954, with limited trout production capabilities. In the mid-1980s, Game and Fish constructed a coldwater facility at Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, which vastly improved production capabilities for both trout and salmon.

While Game and Fish can now stock more large trout, many lakes and reservoirs that were once productive environments for trout have changed. Angler attitudes, pulled along by developing walleye, northern pike and perch fisheries, have changed as well.

Many prairie reservoirs have aged. Silt deposited over decades is reducing depth and nutrients coming in with runoff water from surrounding agricultural land can stimulate excessive vegetation growth. While not every lake is the same, many may not support the

same type of trout fishery they did 30 or even 10 years ago. That doesn't mean they can't support any trout fishery, just that the potential may not be as great as it once was.

This aging process is normal, but is accelerated due to human activities. While there is still a demand for trout fishing in North Dakota, Game and Fish creel surveys indicate trout are no longer as popular with many anglers.

At one time Game and Fish had many trout-specific regulations. Some waters were designated Class I and others Class II. The state had a trout and salmon stamp, purchased by more than 27,000 anglers in 1987. This declined to 13,000 in 1994. As angler attitudes and habits changed, so did trout management strategies. Class I and II designations were dropped. The stamp was discontinued in 1995 as a trade-off for a \$1 fishing license fee increase.

Game and Fish still stocks hundreds of thousands of trout each year, but most are directed at fisheries where trout are simply part of the mix, instead of the feature species.

Some anglers would like to again see, in just a few lakes, trout-specific management intended to produce more large trout.

It's a legitimate request. Many different angling interests want Game and Fish to give management preference to their favorite species or lake. This sometimes works out; sometimes it doesn't. It all depends on biology, available manpower, money and social implications.

It is possible, within the habitat constraints of some lakes, to set up management schemes that might yield higher quality trout fisheries. But there are trade-offs, such as reduced daily bag limits, catch-and-release-only, artificial lures only, closure to winter fishing, and reduced management or elimination of other species. Many anglers, even some who don't care for trout, are more than willing to accept these types of sacrifices to improve a trout fishery. Others will go somewhere else and fish for something else.

A few people – and it only takes one – dislike the special regulations so much they illegally stock their preferred fish back in the lake, which eventually reduces the trout potential and leads to an unbalanced and substandard fishery.

Specialized management of any species or lake is possible, but all factors have to be analyzed. What fishery does the public want? Which public?

These are the types of questions the Game and Fish Department was trying to answer at the public meetings.

Any regulation changes that come about would start, at the earliest, April 1, 2004 with the next fishing proclamation. The following points, listed From Both Sides, factor into this issue.

ONE SIDE

- Lakes with special regulations can increase the odds of people catching larger fish more frequently.
- North Dakota has more than 300 lakes in which Game and Fish manages the fishery. Those listed above account for less than 4 percent of the total number of lakes, about equal to the percentage of anglers who list trout as their preferred fish species. Combined, these lakes add up to fewer than 450 acres, or less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the total acres of fishing waters in the state.
- Trout are fast-growing fish that can reach not just catchable, but trophy size in 3-4 years.
- Trout are hard fighters that can typically be caught from shore or from float tubes – you don't need a boat to catch them.
- Special trout management lakes have worked in the past and provided outstanding fishing and considerable enjoyment for some anglers.
- Many more people will start using managed trout lakes if they produce what they are intended to produce.
- North Dakota has more lakes capable of supporting fish than it has had at any time in the last 100 years or more. Dedicating 8-12 of those specifically to trophy trout management would enhance the exciting mix of fishing opportunities in the state and help attract trout enthusiasts from other states to fish our waters.

THE OTHER SIDE

- Previous special trout management regulations worked in the short term, but neither public support, nor the fisheries, lasted in the long term.
- Trout are sensitive fish that often succumb to warm waters in small lakes during North Dakota summers. In small waters, trout fisheries sometimes don't last long enough for people who use them to get maximum enjoyment.
- Trout in fertile prairie reservoirs often do not taste very good. A majority of anglers do not like to catch fish they can't take home and eat. While many anglers practice catch-and-release, they'd rather pursue fish they can keep and eat if they choose to do so.
- North Dakota already has more than 40 lakes in which trout are stocked, about the same number as has been the case in the last several decades.
- Game and Fish should manage individual waters based on professional insight, experience and biological reality.



Ron Wilson

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department stocks hundreds of thousands of trout in state waters each year. While not all of them get this big, some anglers feel with special management, more trout would grow to whopper size.

- Lake management is primarily based on science, such as what species would best suit the lake size, depth, structure, watershed, forage base and aquatic vegetation mix. But it has to consider user input as well. Some lakes on the list are the closest fishing waters to rural towns, and the majority of people who live nearby might not want "their" lake devoted to one species if it is a species they don't necessarily want to pursue.
- There is substantial evidence suggesting that a few local anglers who don't like the mix of fish in their local lake will become armchair biologists and stock the types of fish they think the lake should have anyway. When this happens, it eventually negates most of the effort put into managing for trophy fish.
- It is not efficient to devote considerable time and money into developing trophy trout waters if the resource is not used by more than a few trout anglers, especially when a different mix of fish would attract more interest.
- The majority of anglers do not use lakes that have trout as the primary species, and there is little support among all anglers for devoting specific waters to trophy trout management.
- Many smaller lakes have a history of winterkill problems. Carrying trout through most winters in order to create a trophy fishery is not possible in those waters.

If you have an opinion on special trout management, let us know what you think. Contact the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501; phone 701-328-6300; email ndgf@state.nd.us.